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DOI
10.4324/9781003355489-5

Publication date
2026

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Auto/Biography and Reputation Politics

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Icks, M. (2026). The Demon and the Prostitute: Justinian and Theodora in Procopius's biographical *Secret History* from sixth-century CE Constantinople. In N. Gernalzick, E. Hagen, M. Icks, J. Keohane, & E. Shiraev (Eds.), *Auto/Biography and Reputation Politics* (pp. 109-128). (Routledge Auto/Biography Studies). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003355489-5

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Download date:08 Nov 2026

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Justinian and Theodora in Procopius's Biographical *Secret History* from Sixth-Century CE Constantinople

Martijn Icks

Visitors who walk up to the mosaics of Emperor Justinian (r. 527–565 CE) and Empress Theodora († 548 CE) in the apse of the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, are treated to a spectacular view. On the left, on the north-eastern wall, Justinian is depicted in the midst of his entourage, wearing luxurious garments and a bejewelled crown. On the right, on the south-eastern wall, the splendidly dressed and bejewelled Theodora strikes an equally impressive figure amidst her ladies of the court. Both Emperor and Empress are depicted with a halo to signify their exalted status and appear to be participating in a religious ceremony (Deliyannis 2010, 238–43; Jäggi 2013, 253–55). The images (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) convey a strong impression of superhuman grandeur and aloof piety. Through such mosaics as well as through monumental architecture, sculpture, public ceremonies, laws, and favourable portrayals in contemporary literature, Justinian and Theodora gained and maintained an extraordinary status in the eyes of their subjects. Even long after their deaths, they were widely regarded as benign, pious rulers.

However, at least one contemporary voiced an alternative and rather less flattering opinion on the celebrated imperial couple. In his *Anecdota* or *Secret History*, the early Byzantine historian Procopius remarks:

> [B]oth to me and also to many of us these two never seemed to be human beings at all but rather murderous demons of some kind [δαίμονες παλαμναῖοί τινες], or as the poets would say, "a baneful pair they were for all mortal men," who conspired together for the purpose of destroying all the nations and the works of men as efficiently and quickly as possible. They put on a human form, thereby becoming man-demons, and in this way demolished the entire world.
>
> (Procopius 2010 [c550 CE], *SH* 12.14)[1]

Procopius's scandalous text, which claims to provide a behind-the-scenes look at the lives and deeds of Justinian and Theodora, had long been lost to

10.4324/9781003355489-5

Figure 4.1 Mosaic depicting Empress Theodora accompanied by ladies-in-waiting. Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Marlena Whiting.

Figure 4.2 Mosaic depicting Emperor Justinian accompanied by clergy including Bishop Maximianus and by members of the military. Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Marlena Whiting.

history. When the manuscript was rediscovered and published in 1623, it dealt a heavy blow to the couple's reputation. Up to that point, Justinian's long reign had been synonymous with the flowering of the Byzantine Empire, which reached its greatest extent under his leadership; with the codification of Roman law in the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (2014 [529–534 CE]); and with grand church architecture, such as San Vitale in Ravenna and, especially, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Procopius appeared to lift the glamourous veil to reveal the rot underneath, transforming Justinian and Theodora from venerable monarchs into a malicious, even demonic couple (Kaldellis 2010, viii–ix). From a long-term perspective, few texts have been more successful in destroying the positive image of the high and mighty.

There is a large body of scholarship on Justinian and Theodora, with monographs and edited volumes on the Emperor usually taking a broad scope on his reign and discussing religious policies, military exploits, and many other aspects (Browning 1971; Evans 1996; Maas 2005; Leppin 2011). Monographs on Theodora tend to focus more on the person of the Empress (Cesaretti 2004; Potter 2015), although James Evans also devotes considerable attention to other matters, such as the wars in Italy (2011). Most of these works exercise solid source criticism and therefore offer a much more nuanced picture of the pair than the *Secret History*, undoing some of the damage done by its hostile author. Other studies have discussed the images of Justinian and Theodora as literary constructions by Procopius, with the hostile portrayal of Theodora in particular receiving much attention (Cameron 1985, 66–82; Ziche 2012; Grau and Febrer 2020). They examine the literary techniques employed in the *Secret History*, such as the use of tropes and allusions, while sometimes also attempting to distinguish fact from fiction.

This contribution will also concern itself with the negative literary images of Justinian and Theodora, but it will approach the topic from the perspective of auto/biography studies and reputation politics studies. Its focus will be on an aspect that often receives only marginal attention, namely Procopius's strategic employment of the biographic genre as a tool to manipulate the reputations of Justinian and Theodora in a negative manner—or, in other words, to commit character assassination (Icks et al. 2020). More particularly, I will focus on the association of the Emperor with demonic forces and the sketch of the youth of the Empress as a prostitute, two of the most striking accusations in the colorful inventory of the *Secret History*.[2] That it was the author's intention to commit character assassination is evident from the text, which makes every possible effort to cast Justinian and Theodora—as well as Belisarius, the chief general of the regime, and his wife Antonina, whom I will leave out of consideration here—in a negative light. According to the narrator's own words in the opening paragraphs of the *Secret History*, Procopius was motivated by a

desire to warn future tyrants, notifying them that "their deeds and characters would be publicized in writing for all time, which might give some pause to their illegalities" (*SH* 1.8).

While it has been suggested that the *Secret History* should be read as merely a sophisticated literary game, not necessarily reflecting the author's true feelings (Golubkov 2018, 114–15), such a reading seems unconvincing in light of the grave risk Procopius took when he embarked on his project. Many Greco-Roman authors wrote negatively about emperors and empresses, but they nearly always did so posthumously. Recording their deeds, wicked or not, while they were still in power could have fatal consequences, which is why Procopius never brought his manuscript into wide circulation.

Procopius as Narrator

Before I proceed to examine the character attacks in detail, it is necessary to establish more precisely who Procopius was and what kind of works he wrote. Leaving aside translations, scholarship on Procopius has flourished in recent decades (Kaldellis 2004b; Börm 2007; Greatrex and Janniard 2018; Lillington-Martin and Turquois 2018). The current interest in research on the Byzantine historian is aided by *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*, edited by Mischa Meier and Federico Montinaro. For the purpose of an approach through auto/biography studies as well as reputation politics studies, it is also necessary to discuss the narrator of the *Secret History* because I do not want to assume beforehand that the relation between author and narrator is entirely self-evident and unproblematic.

The image of Procopius the author is derived from his works, from paratext, and from centuries of biographical scholarship. Following Averil Cameron (1985, 2–17) and Warren Treadgold (2007, 176–226), Procopius, like most Greco-Roman authors, belonged to the upper classes. Born around 500 CE in Caesarea in Palestine as a citizen of the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, he moved to Constantinople to study and practice law. After a period in the service of General Belisarius, whom he accompanied on several military campaigns across the Mediterranean as personal secretary and legal advisor, he settled down in the capital and acquired a seat in the Senate. During his later years, he authored three works: the *Wars*, about the Byzantines' wars with the Persians, Vandals, and Ostrogoths under Justinian; the *Secret History*; and the *Buildings*, a work praising the Emperor's building activities that was probably commissioned by the regime. The date of his death is uncertain but is usually set around 555 CE.

At first glance, Procopius's works offer three widely differing perspectives on the reign of Justinian, a fact that has often baffled scholars. While

the *Secret History* and the *Buildings* indulge in invective and praise, respectively, the *Wars* is a more or less factual report of military events that stands in a literary tradition dating back to Thucydides. In earlier scholarship, it was even doubted whether the *Secret History* was actually written by Procopius, although most scholars now agree that it was (Ranke 1888, 300–12; Adshead 1993, 5–6). Closer inspection reveals that the outlook of the *Wars* and the *Secret History* is not so different after all. The former work betrays a growing disillusionment with Belisarius, Justinian, and the way they handled their military ventures, which is evident throughout the text. While Procopius is careful to dose his open criticism of the Emperor, he makes many indirect accusations, using such time-honored literary tricks as putting his negative judgments into the mouths of characters in the text and criticizing other characters for flaws that would also be applicable to Justinian (Cameron 1985, 134–51; Kaldellis 2010, xxvi). Even the *Buildings* does not just heap praise on the Emperor but contains elements that appear to deliberately highlight the insincerity of the work, such as insinuating allusions to classical texts from pre-Christian Greek and Roman antiquity (Kaldellis 2004b, 51–61).

The *Secret History* shows what Procopius could do when he took his gloves off as a writer. The work is relentless in its hostile portrayal of Justinian and Theodora. The Emperor is described as a tyrannical, corrupt zealot; the Empress as his cruel, calculating wife. Together, they conspire to deprive the people of their riches and to make life miserable for everyone. Discussing the *Secret History* in terms of character assassination, Procopius is clearly the attacker, and Justinian and Theodora are his main targets besides Belisarius and Antonina, who feature prominently only in the first five chapters of the work. The medium of attack is the text itself. The intended audience is less easy to establish. While Procopius wanted the *Secret History* to function as a warning to "future tyrants," he also expressed hope that "my account will not be entirely useless to those who suffer similar things at the hands of future tyrants, […] for there is consolation in knowing that you are not the only one[s] to have experienced such terrible things" (*SH* 1.9–10).

However, it seems unlikely that the text was written exclusively with unborn generations in mind. Many in the upper and middle classes—including aristocrats, clergymen, civil servants, and philosophers, among others—will have been antagonized by Justinian's repressive regime. Presumably, Procopius intended to make his allegations public once Justinian and Theodora had both passed away, but those plans were thwarted by the Emperor's longevity (Kaldellis 2010, xxv–vi). Therefore, the manuscript only appears to have circulated among a small group of like-minded individuals (Beck 1986, 23; Kaldellis 2004a, 2). There are strong clues that it was known to the Platonist philosopher Simplicius and Ioannes

Lydus, who, like Procopius, was a mid-level government official. A generation later, it may also have influenced the ecclesiastical historian Evagrius (Kaldellis 2004a, 2–3). Still, the impact of the work in the sixth century was very modest—nor is there any indication that it was read much afterwards (Kaldellis 2004a, 2). It was only upon rediscovery and publication in the seventeenth century that its poisonous message found a broad, receptive audience.

According to autobiography specialist Philippe Lejeune, autobiography is defined as "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his personal life, in particular the story of his personality" (1989 [1975], 4). In biography, the narrator is not identical with the protagonist of the narrative (Lejeune 1989 [1975], 4–5). The *Secret History* can be regarded as a biographical text on Lejeune's terms, although it differs from many modern biographies in some respects. Apart from the fact that it discusses multiple subjects, the work does not purport to relate the lives of Justinian and Theodora in a chronological narrative, from youth to old age, as modern biographies conventionally do. It is organized thematically, with each section of the text discussing a particular episode from the lives of the imperial pair, a particular type of crime they committed, or a particular group among their victims. Such a thematic approach, although with different themes, is often found in ancient biographies, for instance in Suetonius's influential *Lives of the Caesars*, which describes the lives and reigns of the first-century emperors of Rome and likewise devotes much attention to scandalous stories about its subjects (Meister 2014). Treadgold has remarked on Procopius's indebtedness to the court speeches of famous Athenian orators like Lysias and Demosthenes, which were brimming with fierce personal attacks on their opponents (2007, 209). In addition, Anthony Kaldellis has pointed out that the most cited classical author in the *Secret History* is the comical playwright Aristophanes, whose biting satires about contemporary Athenian politics often deal with themes of corruption, decline, and demagoguery (2010, xxxvii). In Kaldellis's apt characterization, the Byzantine historian is said to "artfully [combine] the roles that today are divided among tabloid reporters, investigative journalists, public intellectuals, and 'disgruntled' administration insiders" (viii). As I will show, Procopius also drew on tropes from the Christian literary tradition, such as saints' lives, to cast his targets in a negative light.

Despite its mixing of genres, the *Secret History* is a prose narrative centred around the lives of its protagonists, whose deeds it does not depict as fictional but as events that actually happened. According to Lejeune's terms, it constitutes a "referential text" (1989 [1975], 22), which means that it claims to provide verifiable information about a world that lies

outside the text itself. Lejeune's theorizing on textual referentiality can thus be applied fruitfully to the *Secret History*, providing a valuable tool to analyze how it functions as a medium of character assassination. After all, a character attack can only be effective if the audience is willing to give credit to the allegations of the attacker, in this case Procopius. If readers approached the *Secret History* as merely a literary exercise, an amusing work of fiction that bore no relevance to the world in which they lived, it would fail to damage the reputations of Justinian and Theodora.

According to Lejeune, any autobiographical work contains an implicit or explicit "referential pact" (1989 [1975], 22) between the author and his/her readership. The author is the person who is responsible for writing and publishing the text and therefore forms a link between the text and the extratextual world—as opposed to the narrator, who only exists within the text and may or may not be identical with the author. In the case of a biography, the referential pact entails that the biographer guarantees the reader that the protagonist of the narrative "resembles" the "model," that is, the "real" person that exists outside the world of the text (Lejeune 1989 [1975], 23–25). Procopius, who is both the author and the narrator of the *Secret History*, does indeed provide such a guarantee in the preface. He does so explicitly, expressing anxiety that the reader may doubt his reliability:

> But as I face this new challenge, namely the difficult and discouraging task of explaining the kind of life that Justinian and Theodora actually led, I find myself at a loss for words and ready to turn back and abandon the effort, as I can predict that the things that I am about to write will not seem trustworthy or even plausible [μήτε πιστὰ μήτε εἰκότα φανησόμενα] to posterity.
>
> (*SH* 1.4)

The anxiety Procopius professes at the start of his work is not just related to the enormity of the crimes he was about to reveal. His credibility as a narrator was potentially compromised by the fact that he was not just the author of the *Secret History* but also of the *Wars*. It is generally assumed that both works were completed in 550–551 CE, with the exception of the eighth book of the *Wars*, which was published a few years later (Evans 1970, 220–21; Cameron 1985, 8; Kaldellis 2010, xxv–vi). Readers of the *Secret History* would hence be familiar with another text by the same author, in part discussing the same people and events, but striking a very different tone. They would be hard-pressed to rhyme the narrator's critical but not overtly hostile stance in the *Wars* with the acid-dripping pen of the narrator of the *Secret History*. In both works, the author claimed that the

people and events he described truthfully resembled those in the world outside the text, but obviously both perspectives could not be equally valid. The discrepancy in tone is even more striking when the panegyrical *Buildings* are taken into account, but that text was only published several years after the composition of the *Secret History*, most likely in 554–555 CE (Cameron 1985, 8–10). It did not yet factor into the equation when Procopius was writing his clandestine diatribe against Justinian and Theodora.

In the preface to the *Secret History*, the narrator immediately signals to his readers that his stance will be different from that of the *Wars*, explaining that "I could not at that time give a candid report [δὴ οὐχ […] ὅτῳ δεῖ ἀναγράφεσθαι τρόπῳ] concerning certain events so long as the people who were responsible for them were still alive;" only now, he alleges, is he finally able "to reveal what had previously remained concealed as well as to disclose the causes of those events that I did report there" (*SH* 1.2–3). As both Justinian and Belisarius were still alive at the time of writing, Procopius evidently wrote these sentences with future publication in mind. Kaldellis suggests that he initially intended to insert the material from the *Secret History* into the narrative of the *Wars* after Justinian's demise but eventually grew impatient and composed two separate texts instead. There are certainly many references to the *Wars* throughout the *Secret History*, so that it serves as a supplement and correction to the already published work (Kaldellis 2010, xxv–vii).

Once Procopius has claimed sincerity as a narrator, he further strengthens his credibility by invoking the authority of reliable witnesses: "My contemporaries, who have exact and firsthand knowledge of the deeds that were committed, will be trustworthy references [ἀξιόχρεῳ παραπομποὶ] in the eyes of posterity for the accuracy of my report" (*SH* 1.5). None of these references are identified by name—a feature that will continue throughout the *Secret History*. It is another attempt, nevertheless, to strengthen the referential pact between author and reader. Even though Procopius claims to write down the scandalous deeds of Justinian and Theodora for the sake of future generations, he is soliciting the reader's trust. After all, his words suggest that he is not interested in mudslinging for its own sake but is driven by a desire to prevent the sort of evil perpetrated by the Emperor and Empress from happening again, insofar as that is in his power (*SH* 1.8–10). Procopius even remarks that he was long held back from putting pen to paper by the consideration that it might be better for the world to remain ignorant about the things he has to say (*SH* 1.6–7). In other words, the narrator of the *Secret History* frames himself as a moral authority who is operating from the noblest of motives. What he is going to tell the reader is not just the truth, but a truth that needs to be told. With this in mind, I proceed to examine how Procopius sought to damage Justinian's reputation through demonic associations.

Justinian as the Lord of Demons

Procopius alleged that Justinian and Theodora were "man-demons" who put on human form and "demolished the entire world" (*SH* 12.14). Without a doubt, this is the most extraordinary claim made in the *Secret History*. Most of the character attacks launched against Justinian and Theodora—corruption, cruelty, and lust, among others—fit in a long Greco-Roman tradition of invective against bad emperors and empresses. Associations with demonic forces were also not unprecedented in Greco-Roman invective. A good example is Claudian's invective poetry (395–397 CE) against the influential courtier Rufinus, who is portrayed as human but alleged to be in league with evil spirits from the underworld (Coombe 2018, 33–70). However, the allegation that Justinian and Theodora are actually demons in disguise puts them in a separate category from past evil rulers. The narrator of *Secret History* remarks:

> In all of history there have of course been many people who have, whether by chance or by their nature, inspired terror to the utmost degree, and who have ruined cities or countries or whatever else lay within their power; but to have devastated all of mankind and visited disaster upon the entire inhabited world [ὄλεθρον δὲ ξυμπάντων ἀνθρώπων ξυμφοράς τε γῆς τῆς οἰκουμένης ἁπάσης], no one has been able to accomplish this except these two people.
>
> (*SH* 12.16)

The miseries that Justinian and Theodora have poured out over the world are not limited to corrupt government, bad legislation, and ill-conceived wars, but also include natural forces that are beyond human control, such as earthquakes, plagues, and floods. According to Procopius, this constitutes proof that "they worked this evil through a power that was not human [οὐκ ἀνθρωπείῳ]" (*SH* 12.16–17). A few chapters further, he presents an alternative view, remarking that some people attribute the many disasters that occurred during the Emperor's reign directly to him while others claim that God turned his back on the Empire in disgust and let the demons have their way (*SH* 18.36–37). Procopius does not specify who these commenters are, nor does he seem keen to decide which interpretation is the right one. What ultimately matters to him is that, either directly or indirectly, Justinian is responsible for all the evils befalling the Empire—or, indeed, the world, since he does not appear to make a clear distinction between the two.

While there are a few passages in the *Secret History* associating Theodora with demonic forces and witchcraft (*SH* 12.14, 22.28, 22.32), the theme is developed more fully for the Emperor. Allegedly, Justinian's mother told

her friends that her son had not been fathered by her husband, Sabbatios, but had been conceived by an invisible demonic creature (*SH* 12.18–19). The notion that great rulers were the offspring of divine beings was a common trope in Greco-Roman life narratives; such claims were made about Alexander the Great and Augustus, among others. However, by reversing the trope and presenting Justinian as demon spawn, Procopius appealed to his reader's familiarity with the conventions of the biographic genre, as Berthold Rubin holds (1951, 470). Christian readers may also have been reminded of the Virgin Mary's impregnation by the Holy Spirit, to which the Emperor's conception formed a negative counterpart.

Several episodes from Justinian's life are offered as further proof of his demonic character. Procopius alludes to the reports of men who had spent time with the Emperor in late-night discussions and who thought they saw "some kind of apparition, a strange demonic being [φάντασμά τι […] δαιμόνιον ἄηθες σφίσιν]" (*SH* 12.20) take his place. One witness reports that the Emperor's head seemed to disappear while his body roamed about the hall, only to reappear later, and another claims that the Emperor's face suddenly became shapeless while he was seated: The eyes, eyebrows, and all other features vanished but once again reappeared later (*SH* 12.21–23). Procopius admits that he has not witnessed these things himself but emphasizes that his account is "based on the testimony of those who insisted that they did see them" (*SH* 12.23)—"men whose souls are pure," as he had characterized the witnesses earlier (*SH* 12.20). However, he also makes a point of mentioning that the witness who saw Justinian's head disappear was very confused by the spectacle and thought that there must be something wrong with his eyes (*SH* 12.21). There is a certain ambiguity about the passage, which, on the one hand, stresses the reliability of the witnesses while, on the other hand, qualifying their reports by stating that this is what "seemed" to happen or what they "believed" (*SH* 12.20–21) they saw. Since the alleged witnesses remain anonymous, and nothing is said about the date of the event, the information is impossible for the reader to check. Nevertheless, the effect is that an eerie association with the supernatural sticks to Justinian, perhaps made all the more suggestive because it is based on somewhat vague and confused second-hand accounts.

In yet another story reported by Procopius, a certain monk from the desert "whom God loved exceedingly" (*SH* 12.24) travels to Constantinople to request an imperial audience. However, as soon as he crosses the threshold of the audience hall, the man turns and flees as if he has suddenly gone mad (*SH* 12.25–26). When his acolytes later ask him what was the matter, "his answer, they say, was that he had seen the Lord of Demons [τῶν δαιμόνων τὸν ἄρχοντα] himself facing him, seated on the throne right there in the palace" (*SH* 12.26). Such pious monks were often seen as holy men and wielded great authority. Once again, therefore, the reader is presented

with a respectable and trustworthy witness yet cannot verify the facts. The monk remains anonymous, and no indication is given when the episode occurred. Moreover, the words "they say" [λέγουσιν] make it clear that Procopius did not hear the story firsthand but through an unknown intermediary.

To an audience of these days, the claims about Justinian's demonic character may seem fantastical and far-fetched. Yet the belief in demons and evil spirits was very pervasive in the sixth century, as Rubin (1951) demonstrates. Although Procopius writes in a classicizing style and, therefore, avoids overtly Christian names and descriptions such as Satan, Devil, or Antichrist, a Christian reader would without a doubt be reminded of these figures when encountering the "Lord of Demons" (*SH* 12.26) in the *Secret History*. Likewise, the episode of Justinian temporarily losing his head appears to reference a headless demon from an apocryphal text circulating at the time, a terrifying creature who is associated with murder and an unquenchable thirst for blood—just as Justinian is in Procopius's narrative (Rubin 1951, 471, 480–81; Gantar 1961; Migdał 2012, 140). Another passage argues that Justinian's demonic self is betrayed by the fact that "he never drank, ate, or slept enough to satisfy the needs of a human being" (*SH* 12.27). Such abstinence is a mark of sainthood in hagiographic texts, yet Procopius makes a point of explaining it in the opposite direction, turning the Emperor's sober lifestyle against him (Grau and Febrer 2020, 786–87). Even a comparison of Justinian with a statue of Domitian has demonic connotations, as the latter was not only regarded as a paradigm of the bad emperor but is also identified as Antichrist or demon in some Christian sources (*SH* 8.12–21; Rubin 1951, 480; Migdał 2012, 136–37). In short, these passages in the *Secret History* constantly play on the reader's familiarity with Christian doctrine and literature, triggering negative associations to cast Justinian in the worst possible light.

At the very end of the text, Procopius anticipates the emperor's death with the words "whenever Justinian departs from this life, in the case that he is human after all, or when, as Lord of Demons, he sets this life aside" (*SH* 30.34). On the one hand, the fact that this is the concluding remark of the *Secret History* underlines its thematic importance. All of Justinian's heinous acts recounted in the previous chapters are expressions of his demonic self. On the other hand, it is therefore all the more surprising how non-committal the remark is. Evidently, convincing his readers that Justinian is literally a demon is not Procopius's primary goal. The significance of the demonic accusations lies elsewhere. As several scholars remark, the portrayal of Justinian as the Lord of Demons is a neat inversion of the glorifying image espoused by the imperial regime and its supporters. After all, the Emperor claimed an extraordinary, perhaps even Christlike status as God's representative on earth, whose piety guaranteed the safety and well-being of his subjects. Procopius undermines this image with its counterpart, reinventing

Justinian as the representative of hellish forces whose evil deeds bring misery and death to the Empire (Rubin 1951, 469–70; Cameron 1985, 56–57; Kaldellis 2010, xliv; Icks 2020, 189). Since the Emperor's positive image enlarges his merits and virtues to a superhuman degree, Procopius's counter-image does the same with his flaws and vices. Both portrayals are part of a rhetorical discourse that aims to either boost or diminish the Emperor's status. What is ultimately at stake is a greater truth, namely whether or not Justinian was a good ruler. As I will show in the next section, Procopius employed similar techniques in his negative portrayal of the Empress.

The Dissolute Youth of Theodora

While many character attacks are launched against Theodora in the *Secret History*, the most scandalous section about her deeds is without a doubt Chapter Nine, sometimes known in scholarship as the "pornography" (Kaldellis 2010, liii). The narrative gives a vivid description of the dissolute youth of the future empress, who comes from a modest background and works in the entertainment business before she catches the eye of Justinian and rises to prominence. Scholars have often been sceptical about the reliability of the colorful claims made by Procopius, remarking that "the sex life of Theodora owes more to male fantasy and literary tradition than reality" (Baldwin 1987, 151; Grau and Febrer 2020, 772). There are no references to witnesses in Chapter Nine, nor to events that can be pinpointed in space and time. Many of the stories may well have had their origins in gossip and rumor (Fisher 1978, 253, 273–77). While truth and falsehood are ultimately irrelevant to the purposes of this article, it is striking that none of the allegations pertain to the period that Theodora sat on the throne. Perhaps claims of sexual depravity would have seemed too incredible in the eyes of contemporary readers who were frequently in the vicinity of the Empress and may have known her personally. However, a long-established convention in Greco-Roman literature holds that a person's character is unchanging, so that the alleged excesses of Theodora's youth also cast a dark shadow on her later years (Ziche 2012–2013, 318).

Sergi Grau and Oriol Febrer point out that several of the biographical anecdotes about Theodora in the *Secret History* are tied to controversial laws that were issued at the time. The most obvious example is the law granting former actresses the right to marry senators, issued during the reign of Justin (*Cod. Iust.* 5.4.23; Grau and Febrer 2020, 781). In Procopius's distorted presentation of the facts, this legal innovation does not concern former actresses but former prostitutes. As the narrator alleges, it was introduced at the instigation of Justinian, who had become so smitten with Theodora that he was determined to marry her, even though this was "prohibited from the earliest times by the most ancient of laws" (*SH* 9.51).

David Daube discusses the details of the marriage law, including the way it was tailored to serve Justinian's personal interests (1967). Of course, the suggestion that the future emperor had laws changed on a whim for purely personal reasons helps to cement his portrayal as a tyrant. It allows Procopius to rant about the scandalous choice of Theodora as a spouse. Justinian is severely criticized for disregarding "the shame of past deeds;" instead of marrying a woman of noble birth and what was considered impeccable behavior, he opted for "the common stain of all mankind [τὸ κοινὸν ἄγος ἁπάντων ἀνθρώπων]" (*SH* 10.1–5).

The long catalogue of Theodora's vices discussed in Chapter Nine serves as build-up to the punchline about her preposterous marriage to the Emperor. According to Procopius, the future empress became sexually active at a young age. Even before she had completely physically matured, she was already in the habit of offering herself to "certain poor wretches who performed that disgusting act on her that some men do with other men" (*SH* 9.10). When she grew a bit older, she joined the stage, despite not having any talent for singing, dancing, or making music. "All she had to offer to passing customers was her youth, and she put her whole body to work for them [παντὸς ἐργαζομένη τοῦ σώματος]" (*SH* 9.11–12). As these passages indicate, Procopius's narrative taps into a long-standing Greco-Roman discourse associating actors with prostitution, as anybody who put their body on public display for money was seen as sexually available (Edwards 1997). Allegedly, the young Theodora does not hesitate to strip in front of passers-by, "revealing in the nude those parts which custom forbids to be shown to men" (*SH* 9.14)—an attestation to her utter shamelessness. She is even prepared to display her almost-naked body in front of a huge crowd in the theater and to have geese peck barley grains off her genitals in a scandalous stage act (*SH* 9.20–21). Clearly, she is the antithesis of the respectable woman the author Procopius might have wished Justinian would have married, namely someone who, in the words of the narrator, "had been raised outside the public gaze, who had learned the ways of modesty and lived discreetly" (*SH* 10.2).

Next to shamelessness, the life of the young Theodora is characterized by sexual insatiability. As the narrator ensures his readers, "never has there been a person so enslaved to lust in all its forms [ἥσσων γάρ τις οὕτως ἡδονῆς ἁπάσης οὐδαμῆ γέγονεν]" (*SH* 9.16). She does not wait for customers to come to her but approaches them on her own initiative, "flirting and suggestively shaking her hips, especially if they were beardless youths" (*SH* 9.15). As the narrator reports, when she was invited to a dinner party, she would engage in all-night sexual activities with her fellow diners and would move on to the servants once they were exhausted, "all thirty of them if that's how many there were"—and even then remained unsatisfied (*SH* 9.16). Theodora's depravity is further underlined by repeated references to the fact that she not only allows her female parts to be penetrated

by her lovers, but other orifices as well (*SH* 9.18). "Thus did she abuse her own body licentiously [οὕτω δὲ ἀκολάστως ἐς τὸ σῶμα τὸ αὑτῆς ὕβριζεν]," the narrator remarks disapprovingly (*SH* 9.24). If her wild escapades lead to pregnancy, as it is suggested frequently happened, she is very skilled in inducing abortions (*SH* 9.19). In this regard, too, the figure is the negative mirror-image of a respectable Byzantine woman, whose main worth was thought to lie in the birthing and rearing of children.

Advocating an alternative view, Hartmut Ziche suggests that the allegations against Theodora in the "pornography" follow the pattern of sexual invective against powerful men. In particular, her unbridled lust, her public displays of depravity, and her submission to anal sex are all stock-in-trade characteristics of bad emperors in the Greco-Roman literary tradition, especially of the Julio-Claudians in the works of Tacitus (Ziche 2012–2013, 317–21). According to Ziche, this indicates that Procopius does not present Theodora as a bad empress but rather as a bad emperor, in a sly comment on the fact that she supposedly gained so much control when she married Justinian that she *de facto* became the ruler (321–22). However, this reading seems forced. The excesses related in Chapter Nine of the *Secret History* also have many parallels in Greco-Roman misogynistic discourse, which frequently portrays 'bad' women as shameless and lustful. Several scholars have pointed out the literary allusions that riddle this section, naming Messalina, wife of Emperor Claudius, as one obvious source of inspiration. Hostile sources portray this third wife of Claudius as a sexually insatiable woman who sneaks out of the palace at night to engage in orgies and can out-compete a prostitute by serving more than two dozen lovers in a row. Procopius's Theodora also evokes associations with Aspasia, the unmarried partner of the celebrated Athenian statesman Pericles, whose detractors depict her as a prostitute and brothel keeper. Like Theodora in the *Secret History*, she is accused of inflaming blind passion in a powerful man, with ruinous consequences for the state (*SH* 9.30–32; Cameron 1985, 66–82; Baldwin 1987, 151; Grau and Febrer 2020, 772).

Procopius did not limit his literary allusions to classical Greco-Roman literature. Grau and Febrer argue persuasively that the life narratives of female saints have also left their mark on the portrayal of Theodora's dissolute youth. During the fifth and sixth centuries, a hagiographic subgenre flourished in the Byzantine Empire in which 'holy harlots' like Saint Pelagia and Saint Mary of Egypt repent of their lives of sin and devote themselves to God, eventually achieving sainthood (Coon 1997, 71–94). Many contemporary readers would doubtless have been reminded of such stories when reading Chapter Nine of the *Secret History*, but instead of finding God, Theodora finds Justinian, Lord of Demons. At his side, she wreaks havoc on the world. Procopius inverted hagiographic conventions to present the Empress as a failed saint (Grau and Febrer 2020, 784–86).

The *Secret History* as a Tool of Persuasion

Procopius went to some lengths to manipulate the life narratives of Justinian and Theodora, and the question remains how persuasive his efforts would have been to his intended readership. After all, character attacks are only successful if they affect the perceptions of an audience (Icks et al. 2020, 19). Procopius went to great lengths to present himself as a reliable narrator at the start of the *Secret History*, establishing a clear referential pact between the author and the reader. However, throughout the text there are few references to witnesses, let alone witnesses mentioned by name. The allegations about Justinian's demonic self and the sexual exploits of Theodora rarely, if ever, contain information about the specific time and place at which the incidents are supposed to have occurred. The narrated events are often situated in a private or socially limited sphere—for Justinian—or at a time before the culprit gains her public status—for Theodora. Many stories appear to be rooted in gossip of the times, without much to back them up.

At first sight, it may seem that the lack of verifiable information would impair the persuasiveness of the allegations and undermine the narrator's attempt to damage the reputations of Justinian and Theodora. However, this is not necessarily the case. Studies in social psychology show that people are inclined to welcome information that confirms opinions they already hold, while they resist information that goes against those opinions (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Kahneman 2011, 80–81). There is no reason to assume this would have been different in the sixth century. Since the immediate readership of the *Secret History* in all likelihood consisted of people who were also critical of Justinian's regime, Procopius's allegations would have found a benevolent ear as long as he avoided all-too-blatant falsehoods. Devoted supporters of the Emperor and Empress were unlikely to be persuaded by the scandalous stories, but people who did not hold strong views on the matter either way—including the future generations the author repeatedly mentions—might well have been inclined to lend them credence.

When considering the persuasive power of the *Secret History* as a medium of character assassination, I also take its high degree of intertextuality into account. Procopius's narrator frequently invokes parallels with historical figures and employs well-established tropes from Christian as well as classical works of literature. The reading audience is clearly expected to recognize and appreciate these intertextual references, which add new layers of meaning to the narrative. In other words, there is an unabashed degree of artificiality to the *Secret History* that seems at odds with the narrator's professed sincerity. After all, if Theodora's depravities are meant to remind the reader of Messalina, what does that imply about the reliability of the story that she was wont to bed dozens of men in nightly

orgies? Evidently, Procopius was less concerned with the factual correctness of every single detail his narrator relates than with establishing a coherent and recognizable narrative about Justinian and Theodora. Readers already knew how demonic creatures and depraved women were supposed to behave. The life narratives of the Emperor and Empress are persuasive because they are shaped to fit familiar patterns.

Procopius is by no means the first author writing in the Greco-Roman literary tradition to employ the biographic genre in this way, although few authors can match the viciousness of his allegations. The lives of great men and women, including emperors and empresses, were often moulded to fit the political and moral agenda of the narrator who chronicles them. As a result, many of these figures spring off the page as either particularly virtuous or particularly wicked (Roller 2018; Icks 2011, 92–122; Icks 2020). Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* (c120 CE) is a case in point, as is the sensational series of imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta* (c380 CE). These works construct emperors such as Titus or Marcus Aurelius as paragons of virtue while painting others such as Caligula, Nero, or Elagabalus as terrible tyrants with scarcely any redeeming features. By making such clear distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' emperors, they draw very clear lines between 'proper' and 'improper' imperial behavior. While many of these life narratives were written decades or even centuries after the death of their subjects, Procopius's work gains a sense of urgency from the fact that it reports about living, or, in the case of Theodora, recently deceased, rulers. It can also be seen as a provocative response to the all-pervasive positive depiction of the imperial pair. As I have shown, Justinian's portrayal as the King of Demons in the *Secret History* is a reversal of the Emperor's image as the Christlike representative of God on earth, while the account of Theodora's dissolute youth as a prostitute reverses the ideal of the chaste, pious wife that any Byzantine empress is expected to embody according to the literary tradition. If Procopius's negative depictions seem exaggerated to the point of caricature, that is in part because they are meant to counter positive images that portray the Emperor and Empress in equally superlative terms.

Conclusion

Living as he did in an authoritarian and repressive regime, in which political power was highly personalized, Procopius employed the biographic genre as an effective means to commit character assassination. Centuries of imperial rule had produced a literary tradition in which the life narratives of emperors, empresses, and other powerful figures were adapted according to patterns and conventions signalling a virtuous or wicked character. In the *Secret History*, Procopius combined these conventions from classical literature with Christian tropes about demons, saints, and sinners. His work was

aimed at an audience of readers who were well versed in both literary traditions and therefore able to understand the many intertextual references and allusions. Despite the narrator's assertion that he will give a candid report about the lives of Justinian and Theodora, these readers would not expect the sort of factual account a biographer in these days might produce. While the latter would be seen to violate the referential pact with the reader by not making her protagonists resemble the extratextual models as accurately as

Figure 4.3 Theodora in a movie of the mid-twentieth century. Movie poster for the English version of the 1954 French-Italian movie *Teodora, Imperatrice di Bisanzio*, directed by Riccardo Freda. https://www.moviemeter.nl/film/ 85137.

possible, Procopius appears to have had much more leeway to employ literary tropes and include unfounded allegations as established facts.

The immediate impact of the *Secret History* on the reputations of the imperial pair was marginal at best, yet its colorful and imaginative claims have found a keen audience ever since its publication in the early modern age. Due to the relative lack of other historical sources from the mid-sixth century, the long-term effect of the work on the general appreciation for Justinian and Theodora has been considerable. The "pornography" section, in particular, has irrevocably changed the popular image of the Byzantine empress. A poster for the English version of the French-Italian movie *Teodora, Imperatrice di Bisanzio* of 1954, directed by Riccardo Freda and starring Gianna Maria Canale in the lead role, shows her as a scantily clad woman with a whip in her hand, breaking free of her chains (Figure 4.3). While the Italian title refers to her as "Empress of Byzantium," she has become *Theodora, Slave Empress* in the English version. The taglines underneath cheer her as "SIREN more enchanting than CLEOPATRA!" and "BEAUTY more brazen than BATHSHEBA!" (Freda 1954). It would be hard to imagine a portrayal that is further removed from the solemn, pious figure glorified in the Basilica of San Vitale mosaic. Procopius would have smiled.

Notes

1 All passages quoted from the *Secret History* are taken from the English translation by Anthony Kaldellis (Procopius 2010). The titles *Anecdota* and *Secret History* were only later assigned to the work; it is not known what title, if any, the text originally bore. Citation is to *SH* chapter number paragraph number.
2 I briefly touched on Procopius's negative depiction of Theodora's youth in a previous article (2020, 188), but provide a much more extensive and in-depth discussion here.

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